

**Interdisciplinary Approaches to Cultural Studies:
Methods and Challenges**
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Abstract

As stated by Tonny Bennett in an attempt to define the domain of cultural studies, “work in cultural studies is characterised by an interdisciplinary concern with the cultural practices and institutions in the contexts of relations of power of different kinds [...] Cultural studies supplies an intellectual field in which perspectives from different disciplines might (selectively) be drawn on in examining particular relations of culture and power” (1998: 27). Cultural studies has thus taken shape as an interdisciplinary field of enquiry drawing upon perspectives from different disciplines for its own purposes. In fact, the question of “its disciplinary and intertextual affinities and antagonism (e.g. with literary practices, sociology, mass communications, ethnography, etc.)” (Jordan, 2000: 99) has become central to contemporary debates on the epistemological status of cultural studies. As Chris Barker puts it, “clarifying the boundaries of cultural studies as a coherent and unified discipline with clear-cult substantive topics, concepts and methods which differentiate it from other discipline remains difficult. Cultural studies is, and has always been, a multi- and post-disciplinary field of enquiry which blurs the boundaries between itself and other subjects” (2004: 42). Recent work in cultural studies accordingly incorporates approaches from a wide range of disciplines including —but not being limited to— sociology, history, literary criticism, anthropology, linguistics, media and communication studies, etc. Assuming the consolidated status of cultural studies as a discipline, this round table will address the multiplicity of analytical methods within the field, so that some of the issues interrogated will be as follows: Which are the methodological implications of the inter- and postdisciplinary character of cultural studies? Which major challenges do cultural studies need

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to face when negotiating its analytical procedures with itself as a discipline and with other fields of enquiry? In which way may cultural studies and its neighbouring disciplines mutually benefit from their methodological approaches? Does the interdisciplinary character of cultural studies amount to not having a method of its own?

Chantal Cornut-Gentile, from the University of Zaragoza, explained how computers, the Internet and ever-more restrictive political economies are clearly affecting the ways in which the “bread and butter” element of the University –i.e. knowledge– is conceived, acquired, transmitted and practiced. And yet, as it (still) stands, the University sustains its long-standing, structural “break-up” of knowledge into separate faculties, each comprising various departments that, in turn, incarnate “disciplines.” Disciplinarity is therefore the end result of a particular type of legitimising organisation that produces, as Foucault argued in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), a “community of competency”. Foucault’s main point in this book, it will be recalled, is that Western societies have become increasingly regulated by norms directed at the “docile body”, and disseminated through a network of cooperating “disciplinary institutions,” including the judicial, military, educational, psychiatric, welfare, religious, and prison establishments, all of which enforce norms and correct delinquencies, using identical techniques of insertion, distribution, surveillance, and punishment. In casting the university, like the prison, as a “disciplinary institution,” what Foucault had in mind is/was the use of dozens of so-called “disciplines”, that is, micro-techniques of registration, organization, observation, assessment, correction and control, all of which are designed to train and “discipline” the students in preparation not only for jobs and professional careers, but for disciplinary societies that demand/require compliant subjects.

The point Cornut-Gentile wanted to underscore is that the disciplinary arrangement of university departments not only serves to train and qualify students, for it also moulds *us* teachers into disciplinary subjects. Indeed, part of our activities as teachers includes some kind of boundary work or border patrol: ruling in and out, for instance, certain readings, research topics and even job applications to better define our areas of expertise. Furthermore, we actively sustain disciplinary

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boundaries through a whole set of corollary institutions: journals bearing the names of the discipline; Master courses, conferences or conference panels labelled by disciplines as well as associations of the disciplines. Neither can we ignore the degree to which disciplinarity as a particular strategy of social control and organization converts *us* teachers into compliant (academic) subjects. If, as Foucault argues, what characterises disciplinary set-ups is their capacity simultaneously to normalize, hierarchize and differentiate through the enforcement of various rewards and punishments, then logically, the price of admission into, and career-making within the academy, is 'conformity' with established norms and dominant academic discourses.

Chantal Cornut-Gentille argues that now, we all know that what is studied under the aegis of an academic discipline is not a natural subject matter, but an arbitrary field of knowledge, contingent on historical circumstances. In this respect, she pointed out that recent interdisciplinary academic formations such as women and gender studies, ethnic studies, film and media studies (among others) can be seen as having developed out of the sense that important social and cultural issues were being lost in the cracks between rigid disciplinary boundaries. And yet, in her view, most interdisciplinary work of the kind modifies, but 'does not change' existing disciplines. Although in certain specific ways, these academic offshoots, break-aways, combinations and/or cohabitations emerged as counter-disciplines, that is, as self-consciously constructed against the oversights, blind-spots or ingrained prejudices of more traditional disciplines, the important point is that these new knowledge formations are invariably marked by the possibility of *themselves* becoming disciplines. Thus, at the end of the road is *discipline* with its usual array of requirements, examinations, training in specialized skills, vocabularies, canons, *and* the recognition and advancement of specialists in the field.

Within such a disciplinary-bound, educational rationale, the seriousness of Cultural Studies as a more free-floating area of knowledge is therefore questioned –its practitioners often being regarded, in controlling and assessing instances, as mere dabblers or dilettantes. Against the cumulus of unfair and discriminatory verdicts, Chantal Cornut-Gentille proposes the following argument: if universities are *public* institutions, why is it that these higher education

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establishments are so rarely considered *part* of the public sphere? Isn't it because the hierarchical set-up and disciplinary structure of studies requires specialists to focus 'more' on the particular concerns of their limited areas of knowledge than on relating that knowledge to the public sphere? As a consequence, many disciplines are far removed from the genuine controversies raging in society. In contrast to ivory-towered academic disciplines, Cultural Studies is a form of engagement, an effort to make sense of the world that transcends internal academic hierarchies and boundaries. By intervening in the ways "texts" and "discourses" (i.e cultural practices) are produced within, inserted into, and operate in the everyday life of human beings and social formations, the aim of Cultural Studies is ultimately *political*, both as a sphere of critique and as a medium of social transformation. It is *this* too often missing, rock-bottom notion that renders much academic work –which labels itself "cultural" – a sterile enterprise.

To conclude, Chantal Cornut-Gentile stated that she believed our universities were disciplinary institutions serving disciplinary societies, that university teachers were disciplinary subjects, and that interdisciplinary enterprises tended to buttress the disciplines. Besides, she said that she took her stand with Cultural Studies' more free-floating, counter-disciplinary, connections with every-day life.

Eduardo de Gregorio-Godeo, from the University of Castilla-La Mancha, suggested that Cultural Studies was now taken to be a – fully consolidated– interdisciplinary field of enquiry selectively drawing upon perspectives from various disciplines for its own purposes. Prior to addressing the potential of other disciplines –linguistics and discourse analysis in the case of his contribution– as methodological resources for Cultural Studies, one has to understand the specificity of the sort of interdisciplinarity characterising Cultural Studies. To this regard, his first point was that any debates on the interdisciplinary nature on Cultural Studies should bear in mind that Cultural Studies is both a *postdisciplinary* and a *transdisciplinary* field of enquiry. Being postdisciplinary means that Cultural Studies has taken shape by using the resources of 'pre-existing' disciplines, which accounts for the tensions emerging when negotiating both its relations with other disciplines and its status as a discipline of its own. Being a transdisciplinary field entails that work in Cultural Studies is nowadays employed by further disciplines to such an extent that, as Couldry

underlines, it “has come to be appealed in almost any other form of theoretically influenced textual study” (2003). Cultural Studies may thus be argued to be at a crossroads with such disciplines as sociology, linguistics, history, media and communication studies, etc. Exploring such an interface or blurring area admittedly involves using the methodological tools of fully consolidated disciplines *for its own goals*, which may not necessarily be the same as those of such pre-existing fields. Hence the common interest in notions like language, discourse, power, ideology, media, representation or identity.

So, which is potential of the linguistic science as a method for Cultural Studies? De Gregorio-Godeo argued that a reply to this question should take into account that, as evidenced in the work by Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, and the poststructuralists on the whole, the notions of *language* and *discourse* are central to the theorization of cultural debates. However, such concepts are often invoked in rather ‘abstract’ terms by cultural theorists. Here, linguistics in general and discourse analysis in particular may provide methodological tools of detailed textual analysis helping Cultural Studies (a) decipher the role language usage in the constitution of cultural practices, and (b) locate the use of texts within wider socio-cultural matrixes. In order to instantiate how Cultural Studies may benefit from the methodological resources of discourse analysis, Eduardo de Gregorio-Godeo focused on four vibrant approaches within the field today.

Firstly, *critical discourse analysis* may bridge the gap between linguistics and cultural theory through the examination of language-ideology-and-power relations. As work by Norman Fairclough, Teun van Dijk or Ruth Wodak substantiates, in adopting a constitutive view of language, society and culture, critical discourse analysis may be useful in disentangling the mutual influences between language usage and culture in specific social formations. Hence common issues of concern like gender, race, class or globalisation –and a similarly committed position on the side of the oppressed.

Moving ‘beyond’ linguistic texts as cultural artefacts, work in *multimodal discourse analysis* by authors like Gunther Kress or Theo van Leeuwen explores relations and interconnections between language and other semiotic modes like image or music. Images –alone or in

combination with language— are thus possibly ‘read’ and accounted for within the cultural contexts where they are produced.

Likewise, in seeing genres as culturally-oriented ways of using texts, *genre theory* may provide invaluable mechanisms for identifying cultural change through its linguistics cues, by way of example, by analysing the creation and change of subgenres. In a similar fashion, *register analysis* may account for the linguistic realization of cultural processes such as the ‘conversationalization’ of print media, or the increasingly informal tone of, for example, news bulletins on television to attract audiences.¹

De Gregorio-Godeo wanted to take these few examples delving into the methodological potential of discourse analysis for cultural analyses to expand upon the implications of interdisciplinarity in Cultural Studies today. In point of fact, although interdisciplinarity in Cultural Studies is contributing to increase academic cooperation with its ‘neighbours’, it is not always easy for Cultural Studies practitioners to legitimize their work within existing academic canons. Here, he believes, the challenge for Cultural Studies lies in neither justifying its position as a field of enquiry nor its interdisciplinary nature, nor even in trying to find a method of its own. Its challenge is rather to ‘reaffirm’ the validity of *multiple* and *varied* methodological perspectives for its own purposes, which purposes make Cultural Studies distinct from those disciplines that it may complement indeed. De Gregorio-Godeo, therefore, agrees with Alexander and Seidman’s view that “it is necessary to resolve the pedagogic difficulties posed by the very richness and diversity of the new Cultural Studies” (1990: vii). Cultural Studies should accordingly continue to ‘integrate’ methodological perspectives from its neighbouring disciplines in order to reassess, by way of example, notions like identity, representation, cultural production and consumption, power, etc. Nonetheless, this challenge should *not* be viewed as an attempt, on the part of Cultural Studies, to be seen as an ‘alternative’ to its neighbours. Here again, Bennett’s (1998: 27) view is most illuminating in this respect as he advocates “the need of integrating different disciplinary perspectives into a moving method which will achieve greater forms of completeness from the point of view of understanding the cultural process as a whole”.

¹ *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Schiffrin, Tannen and Hamilton, 2001) may be illustrative of current directions of research in discourse analysis.

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Finally, José Manuel Estévez-Saá, from the University of A Coruña, and in order to provoke or motivate the debate, started by saying that many people maintain what Steven Connor calls “an irresponsible relation to Cultural Studies.” Two were the basic reasons he posed:

- 1) It is important to understand and distinguish between Cultural Studies and cultural study with their respective norms and assumptions (Connor 1).
- 2) Any Cultural Studies project must be critically supported no matter the theoretical approach we adopt or assume. And this implies the development of a solid critical apparatus, as well as a serious and deep analysis of the existing literature review.

Estévez-Saá argued that it is high time we give up trying out “hollow possibilities which have inflicted much harm and side effects” on our academic line of research. Therefore, if we want to defend and vindicate Cultural Studies as a rigorous field of research, we must do the best of ourselves to forget about attitudes that were typical and quite common during the 80s and 90s and that were grounded on those other first steps that emerged in the 70s, precisely when the international intelligentsia was trying to conform the “solid basis” of what we understand nowadays as Cultural Studies.

His particular method, the Literary-anthropological perspective, Estévez-Saá manifests, consists of a process of hybridisation that emerges within the framework of Cultural Studies out of the combination of two disciplines such as Anthropology and Literature. The Literary-anthropological Method understands literature as a cultural manifestation characterised by a clear social intention, but one which does not renounce its realistic and mimetic dimension. This dimension allows us to give expression to a social reality, a hidden truth that we will try to recreate and represent by means of our academic contributions.

José Manuel Estévez-Saá maintains that Literary Anthropology assumes, accepts and takes advantage of the destabilization and the transformations of the classic fields of study that have led to a singular process of hybridisation or interdisciplinarity which has been taking

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place in the last decades, and that has emerged, precisely, as a kind of reaction against capitalist specialization.

It was in a recent publication (Estévez-Saá, 2003: 15-25) that he made an attempt at defining and explaining the origins and dimensions of the literary-anthropological scope, and the key figures who established the first debates on the matter. Among others, he mentions James Clifford who, in *Dilemas de la Cultura: Antropología, Literatura y Arte en la perspectiva posmoderna* (1995), understands this disciplinary orientation that results from the relationship between Anthropology and Literature as an assumption that implies how ethnographic knowledge cannot be the property of any single discourse or discipline (1995: 120). He highlights the importance of Language and the way it is articulated in Literature (1995: 41, 120), and also the relevance of the method of observation or 'participatory view' that both the writer and the anthropologist share as tellers of a reality that they experience (Clifford, 1995: 53-54).

Estévez-Saá also explained how, from the point of view of literary creativity, the relationship between Anthropology and Literature becomes much more obvious. A writer recreates realities not only in literary but also in anthropological terms. The artist in general, and the writer in particular, are conscious of human and social unrest, and they decide to materialise it. With this purpose in mind, they tend to adopt as many sources and methods as they are able in order to reach this objective. The anthropologist sometimes becomes a literary writer, as Clifford Geertz says in *The Anthropologist as Author* (1989), in the same way as the writer adopts the anthropologist's role and view, as Fernando Poyatos reveals in *Literary Anthropology: A New Interdisciplinary Approach to People, Signs and Literature* (1988), and Roser Sentis Maté and José Luís Rodríguez Regueira in "Sobre el escuchar o la creatividad desde la nada" (1995).

José Manuel Estévez-Saá commented on the fact that as time goes by, the Literary-anthropological Method is becoming widespread all over the world, as we can verify and confirm by paying attention to a great number of academic and theoretical books on writers and their works based on the literary-anthropological critical perspective. Besides, he argued, this angle of vision is not only applied to popular writers or popular culture. Cultural Studies in general, and the literary-anthropological point of view may be also applied to what some people

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call high culture or canonical authors. Thus, for instance, Estévez-Saá gave examples of pieces of research on Jonathan Swift such as *Purity and Defilement in 'Gulliver's Travels'* (1987), by Charles H. Hinnant; on Joseph Conrad, such as *Joseph Conrad and the Anthropological Dilemma: Bewildered Traveller* (1995), by John W. Griffith; on E. M. Forster, such as *The Prose and the Passion: Anthropology, Literature and the Writing of E. M. Forster* (1994), by Nigel Rapport; on Thomas Hardy, such as *Thomas Hardy and the Proper Study of Mankind* (1993), by Simon Gatrell; on T. S. Eliot, such as *Savage and the City in the work of T. S. Eliot* (1988), by Robert Crawford, etc.

Similarly, Estévez-Saá stated that there exist a large number of works that propose a perspective that results from the combination of Anthropology and Literature as an appropriate method of literary criticism. Firstly, he mentioned *The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology* (1993), by Wolfgang Iser, where the author explores Literature as a fundamental field for the study of human experience. Also in the book edited by Jeffrey M. Peck and E. Valentine Daniel *Culture/Contexture: Exploration in Anthropology and Literary Studies* (1995), we are told about the way in which literary critics have learned to 'anthropologize' their studies and become conscious of the anthropological component in texts of narrative fiction. Another important contribution is the book by Wolfgang Iser and Wolfgang Aser *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (1993), where we find wide-ranging reflections upon the framework of fiction, and upon our reconciliation with the society and culture in which we live, by means of the analysis of the works written by authors such as Spenser, Shakespeare, Joyce and Beckett; etc. (Estévez-Saá, 2003: 21).

José Manuel Estévez-Saá ended his intervention pointing out that the Literary-anthropological Method springs out of a process of hybridisation that demands new interpretative strategies, and emphasising the importance of re-learning to read to become accurate cultural interpreters. Besides, he considers the method proposed as a possible way of revising Literary History as well as an opening and an entrance for voices that have been previously marginalised or rejected.

The roundtable similarly considered the question of Cultural Studies in the face of the forthcoming reform of university degree studies in Spain; and concluded that, after reading the Real Decreto de

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Ordenación de Enseñanzas Universitarias Oficiales (28th October, 2007), something that deserves all our attention and our reflection is that no reference is made to ‘culture’ amongst the so-called Basic Subjects for Arts and Humanities degrees. Therefore, the uncertain position for Cultural Studies in this context was accordingly discussed in the course of the debate.

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